

A Conversation with Jerry Reed
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 7/2005)

Jerry Reed was already a triple threat before his career in movies took off. He was a hit songwriter, a red-hot session guitarist, and a star performer. He was further catapulted into the pinnacle of the entertainment world by more than a dozen movies, including the three blockbuster releases of *Smokey and the Bandit*. One of his biggest hits, “East Bound and Down,” came from that movie. He is what must be called the Renaissance Redneck, because he’s done it all. And he’s still doing it, at almost 70 years old. His new live CD, *Jerry Reed Live, Still!*, proves that the Alabama Wildman has still got it going on, way on.

He was only 17 when he signed his first major record deal. His career has already spanned 51 years. He’s picked up multiple CMA and Grammy Awards along the way, and lots of songwriting awards for tunes he recorded himself or those that were covered by a list that includes Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Brenda Lee and many others.

He’s an unbelievable guitar stylist, and we couldn’t resist including a clip of one of his classic instrumentals that’s not included on this new live CD, “The Claw.” It features the master on the gut string for which he’s famous, absolutely tearing it up. He and Chet Atkins (who signed him in 1964 to RCA) are lifelong friends, and did a lot of recording together. He’s also cut many hot Telecaster tracks on the hundreds of records he’s played on, but his gut string work is unduplicated anywhere.

He came to my house one time in the late eighties or early nineties, with a drummer of his that I knew from town. I was the MESA/Boogie amp rep in Nashville at the time, and to try them out you had to come over to my place, which turned out to be a good way to meet a lot of the hot guitar players in town. I ran him through all the different models and they really didn’t do much for his style, until the drummer suggested we plug him into a bass speaker, and then his legendary thumb got even bigger—it was a scary thump that rocked my little house and made The Guitarman smile. He bought one of those speaker cabinets, and still uses it, as we remember in the interview. I stole some licks in open G tuning off him that day, and am writing a song about a dog this week that uses those licks that the interview brought back to mind. Funny how everything comes around eventually.

Jerry Reed was full of life on the phone, a real pleasure to talk to. Faith has become a big force in his life, and the new song “A Brand New Me” tells the story. We like his funny new song about aging, too, “Father Time and Gravity.” The man’s very down to earth for a legend who’s accomplished what he has, and he doesn’t seem to take himself too seriously. But we take his music very seriously, and highly encourage everybody to check out some clips on the Listen page, and to pick up the new live CD.

PM: Jerry, this is Frank Goodman calling you from Puremusic.com.

JR: Well, hello, Frank. How in the world are you doing?

PM: You know, it's a beautiful day out there, and I'm having a good time. And you?

JR: Having a wonderful time. Had me a great time last night on the lake, caught me a couple of bass, so I feel like my life is full. Well, son, how do you like that?

PM: [laughs] Ah, well, it sounds like you got your priorities straight.

JR: Mm-hmm.

PM: I sure love that new live record, *Live Still*.

JR: Well, thank you, Frank. We sure had a good time doing it, I know that. It was one of those magical nights.

PM: And some of those people on the stage with you that night go back a hell of a long way with you.

JR: Oh, yeah. My banjo player goes back—well, actually, he's my lead guitar player and bandleader, and he plays the banjo. He can play about anything he gets his hands on.

PM: That's Bobby Lovett.

JR: Bobby Lovett, yeah. He has been with me twenty-one years.

PM: And Mark Thornton, has he been in the band a long time, too? I don't know him.

JR: Mark? Yeah, Mark for about eight years.

PM: Now, is "Ms. Pris" [as credited on the CD] Priscilla Reed Hubbard?

JR: That's exactly right. Been traveling with me for about twelve years. I couldn't do it without Mama.

PM: [laughs]

JR: I'll tell you that right now.

PM: Or without Pig Robbins. [keyboardist extraordinaire]

JR: Yeah. What about Pig?

PM: What about Pig? Oh, my Lord.

JR: Well, there ain't nothing in the world like Pig. I'm telling you that right now. There ain't nothing in the world like Hargus.

PM: I met you one time, maybe ten years ago. You came to my house with Bobby West looking at some Mesa Boogie equipment.

JR: Yeah.

PM: And I believe you bought a bass cabinet that day.

JR: I've still got it.

PM: Yeah, we ran through a bunch of stuff, and you said, "Frank, I don't hear a damn thing in here for me. It's all nice stuff, but it doesn't work for me." And Bobby said, "Well, Frank, why don't we plug him into the bass cabinet?"

JR: Yeah, I still play through it today...

PM: Unbelievable...who knew we'd be on the phone again what's got to be a decade later. That's great.

I don't think anybody has ever heard a funkier gut-string player than yourself. I'm not sure one exists, really. How did the gut string come to be a prime ax for you, as a southern guitar guy?

JR: Because of the gut strings. I mean, it's that simple. Metal strings always tore my nails off because I played too hard. And when I found the gut string, I said, "Man, I never seen one of these."

PM: Wow.

JR: And I got to playing that thing, and I just fell in love with it. And I put the strings down to where they'd rattle and be funky.

PM: Right.

JR: And that's sort of what cemented my style of playing, really.

PM: No kidding. I mean, after I heard *Live Still* I had to—and I was so pleased when I got to iTunes and found that, oh, man, there's all kinds of Jerry Reed tunes up here on iTunes, and downloaded "The Claw," and bought the "Alabama Jubilee," and all kinds of tunes.

JR: [laughs] You did?

PM: Yeah! I had to get me some more Reed after I heard that live record.

JR: [laughs] Well, great, son.

PM: “The Claw” is incredible. Is that regular tuning?

JR: Oh, yeah. I do it in “A,” in regular tuning.

PM: But I remember when you were over at the house that day ten years ago—I hope you don’t mind, I was watching and stole some licks off you in what I believe was open “G” tuning. Did you also play a lot in that?

JR: Yeah, oh, yeah. I love open tuning, I love that open “G” tuning, that flat fingering.

[laughter]

JR: That’s how I did “Alabama Lawman,” the original was in open “G” tuning—

PM: Ah.

JR: —and the “Tupelo, Mississippi Flash,” because it left my left hand free, see, and I could get in there and move around and boogie-woogie. [laughs]

PM: Right. Yeah, because you got the best thumb in the business.

JR: Well, I don’t know about that, but it was fun.

PM: [laughs] How do you pickup that nylon string of yours, and what kind of a guitar is that?

JR: Oh, well, I fell in love with that old Electric Baldwin.

PM: Electric Baldwin.

JR: Yeah, and I’ve still got one. Funkiest most worthless guitar you ever seen, but that pickup was great. And I could be heard with the drums.

[laughter]

PM: So you mean Baldwin actually made the guitar?

JR: Yeah. It’s a Baldwin guitar.

PM: Oh, my God. And you can’t find those for love or money, I’m sure.

JR: Oh, no, they’re scarce as hen’s teeth.

PM: [laughs]

JR: But I got me one.

PM: And they worked with a certain Baldwin amplifier, then.

JR: Well, I play through any amp.

PM: Right, any.

JR: Yeah. But I played through a Baldwin. I recorded with a Baldwin amp, but also Ampegs and Fenders and every other one you can mention. Yeah, I've played through them all.

PM: Is it really possible that you've not yet been inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame, or did I just miss that?

JR: Oh, no. They haven't inducted me, and they probably won't. But who cares? That doesn't matter. What does that matter?

PM: It doesn't matter. It's just, to me, a cultural anomaly.

JR: Well, who cares?

PM: [laughs]

JR: You know, I don't care, one way or the other. I know what I'm doing, and I've been blessed and very fortunate. And the Hall of Fame is not going to make it one way or the other for me.

PM: That's right. And every guitar-loving son—

JR: I'm in the Hall of Fame in Georgia, so—

PM: I saw that.

JR: —so I've made my Hall of Fame appearance.

[laughter]

JR: Years ago, it would have made a difference, I guess. But I've got my priorities now, so it doesn't matter to me.

PM: "A Brand New Me," on the new record, is a tune that portrays a man of faith.

JR: Well, that's what I am, son.

PM: I'd love a good conversion story, if there is one. Maybe you'll talk a little about your faith.

JR: Well, I'll guarantee you, the days of my youth, I was raised in church, and I got away from it for many, many years. But you can't stay away from Jesus. Believe me, you just can't do it. Somewhere down the road, you've got to put two and two together, and realize that this existence down here is just like a vapor, you're here and then you're gone.

And where are you going to spend eternity? Well, I'm going to spend it with God. That's where I'm going to spend my days. I hope I run into Chet and Merle and them guys, and can play rhythm for them again.

[laughter]

PM: Well, they're good guys, so I think you would run into them there.

JR: I hope so, because I'm their best rhythm player.

[laughter]

PM: God knows that's right. No pun intended. When did Jesus catch up with you on the road again? How and when did it happen?

JR: Well, I heard Mel Gibson talking about how he had everything he ever wanted in the world, all the money he ever needed, but there was still an empty hole in his heart.

PM: Wow.

JR: And that was the case with me. You're down here and you chase fame, and you chase fortune, and then you get it, and you realize, well, hey, so what? I'm going to leave this world in a hole in the ground, you know?

PM: Right.

JR: This is not really what's important. What's important is getting your heart right. And I went back and asked the Lord to come back into my heart and let me serve him the rest of my days on this planet. And it makes all the awards and the accolades—let me just say, they're distant second—or third or fourth.

PM: Yeah.

JR: [laughs] You know, I'm at peace again, and my life is in order. I wake up every day a new man. It's just fabulous to live this way—freedom at last. [laughs]

PM: Brother, I hear you.

JR: You know, people think when you give your heart to the Lord, you're restricted. But hey, that's where the freedom is. You know what I mean?

PM: I hear that. Here you may be answering my next question, which was I imagine that at different times in your life you considered yourself a songwriter first, a picker first, a session man first, an entertainer first. You've been a lot of things to a lot of people. But what do you consider yourself first these days?

JR: Hey, that's like trying to pick out your favorite leg.

PM: Yeah.

[laughter]

JR: Because everything I ever did meant something when it happened, it really did. The hit songs kept me in the business when I was starving, and the sessions, when my records weren't happening, and then the records led me to the movies, to network television and the movies. And I know it's a part of—it was just God's plan. You come here with a stamp on you, son.

PM: Yeah.

JR: The good Lord sends you here for something—everybody—I don't care who you are. And so picking the favorite—they're all a gift from the Almighty, so I don't have a favorite. I'm just grateful for every one of them.

PM: I mean, just paging through your session career alone is mind boggling, you know—Elvis, Waylon, Bobby Bare. I even saw a record you were on of Robert Mitchum's in '67.

JR: Oh, yeah.

PM: Could he sing?

JR: Yeah. Yeah, Mitchum could sing.

PM: Because if you listen to his speaking voice, you'd think that, yeah, I'll bet he could sing.

JR: Yeah, he could sing, yeah. The one that I really remember is Dean Martin.

PM: Oh!

JR: Boy, what a character.

PM: One of my favorite singers.

JR: [laughs] And I loved him. I enjoyed that album with him.

PM: He had to be a very funny man.

JR: Oh, I'm telling you, he is just what you see on television.

[laughter]

PM: So many musicians have tried, but you actually succeed in having a notorious film career. Are you going to do any more movies?

JR: No. It's going to be music for me, from now on, son, because there's nothing on earth as powerful as music, period. I mean, it's pretty hard to fight and hate and be angry when you're making music, isn't it?

PM: [laughs] Yeah, I never could.

JR: Ain't nothing like it, son. Nothing like it.

PM: In sharing your experience with our readers, would you tell us one thing that you really did right and one thing you really did wrong with your career?

JR: [laughs] It'll have to be mostly all wrong.

PM: [laughs]

JR: I have a saying: I'm living proof that God is alive and well because he allowed me a level of success in my life in spite of myself.

[laughter]

JR: You can print that. You know, the things I did right, he directed. The things I did wrong were of my own doing. And I did a lot of them. But he never, ever let me go. That's what's so wonderful. He never—it's like it says in John, "Once they're mine, no one can take them away from me." And he watched after me in all my down time, and kept watch over me so I could come back. That's the wonderful part of my testimony.

PM: We at Puremusic here have gotten the documentary bug lately, and I got the urge to get great musicians, friends of mine, performing on video, especially in the comfort of their own home. What do you think about the at-home approach, versus just videotaping a show? It seems to me that if you're going to catch great musicians, you should catch them at home, just playing a tune.

JR: I don't know if they like all that show business at their house.

PM: Ah, I see your point.

JR: [laughs] See, I learned this in the movie industry. Boy, when you start bringing video equipment into somebody's house, and disrupt their daily life, they don't like it. We'd do TV shows years ago, and we'd get a location. And they were all gung ho when it first started until they saw what it did to their house and how disruptive it was. And then they didn't like it.

[laughter]

PM: Well, that's a hot tip, there. I think I learned something there. Because didn't you have your own huge video facility around Nashville at one time?

JR: That's one of the things I did wrong. I wish you hadn't brought it up.

PM: [laughs] Sorry about that.

JR: Yeah, I did. It cost me an arm and a leg. Oh, yeah. I ain't doing it anymore, I'll tell you that.

PM: And eventually you got out from under it.

JR: Oh, eventually. It took me a while, but I did.

PM: I know that you officially retired from touring last year. If this is retirement, what might be up ahead?

JR: Well, I'm in the studio now. And when I say "retired," it's—well, who knows? But for the next year or so, I'm going to be in the studio finishing two albums.

PM: Wow.

JR: So I've got my work cut out for me, son. I just decided that I wanted to do what I love doing the best, and that's get in that studio and come out of left field somehow, and do something that nobody else has done.

PM: [laughs]

JR: And one of my albums is so off-the-wall, you're not going to believe it.

PM: Oh?

JR: I've got a twenty-two minute song in it.

PM: Really?

JR: [laughs] Yeah, I do.

PM: What is it about?

JR: I ain't going to tell you.

PM: [laughs]

JR: I ain't about to tell you. What do you mean, what is it—I ain't telling you nothing.

PM: [laughs]

JR: Give you something to look forward to. You can go around and tell folks, “That crazy Reed, he’s got a twenty-two minute song. He wouldn’t tell me what it was.”

PM: Oh, my Lord. And I know you got a twenty-two minute song in you, too. I can’t wait to hear it.

JR: You’ll enjoy it, because it’s off-the-wall. It really is. You’ll love it.

PM: [laughs] We’ll be looking for it. And I’ll call you back when that comes out and we’ll put you on the cover again and talk about your twenty-two minute opus.

[laughter]

JR: Well, when you hear it, you’re going to roll your eyes back and look up at the ceiling and say, “Reed is just out there. He’s somewhere—I don’t know, we got to go locate him. I believe he’s in another galaxy.”

[laughter]

JR: You just wait, and mark my words.

PM: Consider them marked. It’s great to talk to you, Jerry.

JR: Well, it’s been my pleasure, my pleasure, indeed. And God bless you for calling. And I’ll look forward to your response when you hear it—the new song, I mean.

[laughter]

PM: All the best to you and your family. It’s very nice to talk to you, Jerry. You take care, and rock on, my brother.

JR: You, too. God bless.